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Tuesday, Jul 15, 2003

South Jersey

Posted on Wed, Apr. 23, 2003

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Push plant safety, Corzine urges public

The N.J. senator urged residents to lobby for a law requiring chemical facilities to explore upgrades.

By Adam Fifield
Inquirer Staff Writer

PAULSBORO -U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine yesterday encouraged residents of South Jersey to pressure industrial facilities with hazardous chemicals to pursue safer alternatives.

"There are eight sites in the [Philadelphia] region that have a million people or more that could be exposed to toxic fumes if there were a terrorist attack," said Corzine, citing U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data.

The author of pending legislation on chemical-plant safety, Corzine stood in Gloucester County within a mile of two of those facilities - the Valero Energy Corp. oil refinery in Greenwich Township and the Solvay Solexis chemical manufacturer in Thorofare.

Corzine said that some companies had been resistant to investigating how to reduce stores of hazardous chemicals or replace them with safer alternatives - which his Chemical Security Act would require - and that he would "like to see pressure put on them" to do so.

"I think the public needs to lobby on this," he said.

The plants Corzine mentioned were the focus of a two-day series this week in The Inquirer.

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Corzine's comments came after an Earth Day ceremony to inaugurate a solar-energy project built by the BP oil and gas company at its former storage site in Paulsboro.

In addition to requiring plants to consider reducing or eliminating chemical hazards, Corzine's bill would direct the Department of Homeland Security and the EPA to identify "high-priority" facilities and compel them to fix security weaknesses.

The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee endorsed a version of the bill, 19-0, in July. Industry opposition killed the proposal, and Corzine reintroduced it early this year. The Bush administration is backing separate chemical-security legislation that would not mandate firms to look at safer alternatives.

Corzine, who predicted this month that the Republican-sponsored bill would be "100 percent on the side of the chemical industry," said yesterday that he might attempt to attach his legislation to an energy bill.

Noting that security at plants with hazardous chemicals "is completely voluntary," Corzine said: "I know the public wouldn't stand for that with nuclear plants. I don't think they should stand for it with chemical plants."

Paulsboro Mayor John Burzichelli, who led the ceremony for the BP solar-energy project, said he supported Corzine's push. "We have to make these processes as safe as they can be," he said.

But the companies should not be left to pursue the changes on their own, Burzichelli said. He said the Department of Homeland Security should set aside money for the research of safer chemical processes.

"Why not take some of that money and help these companies invest in safer technologies?" he asked.

Corzine, whose legislation would offer financial assistance to companies, said he had no vendetta against chemical facilities and other plants with hazardous substances.

"I'm not trying to beat up on industry," he said. "I'm just trying to get everyone up to a quality standard."

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